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Memoir

OF THE LATE

Hon. Walter Folger.

From the Nantucket Inquirer, Sept. 21, 1849.

NEW BEDFORD:
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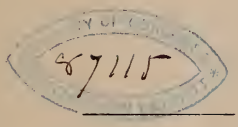

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by E

Williams Coleman Folger

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Memoir.

Hon. Walter Folger was the eldest son, but the fourth child of Walter and Elizabeth Folger, and was born on the 12th day of June, 1765. He attended, when of a suitable age, the schools of that period, where reading, writing and arithmetic were taught. In none of the schools was Grammar a branch of study, and whilst a scholar he never saw a Dictionary. In 1782 and 1783, he went to school winter evenings. and learned Navigation by Logarithms, and Gauging by Gunter. He had previously obtained, by studying at home, a good knowledge of Navigation as then practiced by the Tables of Latitude and Departure, and by Gunter's Scale. When in school, he often surprised his teacher by solving Arithmetical questions in a new and shorter manner than the teacher had been accustomed to. Soon after this period, he and several other young gentlemen began the study of Algebra without an instructor, and continued it till they were well acquainted with its principles; they also obtained some knowledge of Fluxions.

On the 29th of December, 1785, he was married to Anna, daughter of Alexander Ray. They lived together, in harmony, 59 years. she dying on the 20th of September, 1844. They had a family of eight sons and two daughters to grow up, all of whom, but one daughter, who died a young woman, have married and are blessed with families.

About the time of the French Revolution of 1789, he, with several others, one of whom was his sister, (Phebe Coleman,) began the study of the French language. Having procured Boyer's French Grammar and Dictionary, and several other books in that language, they met during the evening, three times a week, studied the language and translated the whole of the New Testament. Now he first learned Grammar. They occasionally had the assistance of some Frenchman in learning the pronunciation. He afterwards read much in the Encyclopædia Methodique and other French books, and acquired from them much information in the arts and sciences. He could converse in the language, and found it useful to him when thrown into the company of foreigners abroad—in stage coaches and at hotels.

For many years he employed most of his leisure time in studying, much of which time was taken from the hours devoted by others to sleep.

About the year 1783 he was unwell, confined to the house, and most of the time to his bed. During this time he learned the Lunar Observations, from a book one of his uncles had procured abroad, the first of its kind on the Island. He was the first person on the Island who learned them. He taught them, about the year 1789, to Capt. Joseph Chase of this place, who was perhaps the first American captain who found his longitude by Lunar Observations.

When a young man, his father being in good circumstances, there were some thoughts of sending him to college, but owing to religious scruples, (his father being a Friend,) the idea was not carried into effect; so that he was almost wholly self-taught. No doubt, if he had had the benefits of a college education, he would have become more distinguished n the paths of literature and science.

During the Revolutionary War, his father worked at the tin-plate business and farming, and the subject of our memoir

assisted him. After peace took place and the whaling fleet had brought cargoes of oil to the Island, the manufacturing of sperm oil and candles, which had been suspended during the war, was resumed by them, his father's being the second candle manufactory on the Island.

At intervals, whilst engaged in the above mentioned employments, he took up the business of a watch and clock maker, which business he carried on for many years of his life.

He had obtained considerable knowledge of Astronomy as early as the year 1788, for in that year he commenced his Astronomical clock, which he completed in 1790, and set in motion on the fourth of July of that year.

He was about 22 years of age, when he planned this clock. He submitted the plan to his father, who was an excellent mechanic and good mathematician, and could comprehend it, and who was satisfied it would operate well. Besides what is usual in clocks, it keeps the date of the year, and also of the month. The sun and moon rise and set in the clock, at the same time those luminaries do in the heavens; it shows also the Sun's place in the Ecliptic. It keeps the motion of the moon's nodes around the Ecliptic, which take 18 years and 225 days in the revolution, and the wheel that performs this revolution is that time in turning, being in continual motion all the while. One of the wheels that keeps the date of the year, is 100 years in performing a revolution; remaining stationary 10 years, then moving one notch. This clock is considered by all who have become acquainted with its powers and performances, one of the greatest specimens of mechanical ingenuity in the country. It must have required superior mechanical skill and a good knowledge of Astronomy, to construct it; it also requires some knowledge of that science to put it in regular operation.

He calculated and published an Almanac for the year 1790; he also made the calculations for one for 1791, and at a later period was called upon to assist in completing Low's Almanac—Low himself having died before its completion.

Whilst engaged in the watch-making business, he studied medicine and surgery, and acquired as thorough a knowledge of them as the most of the practitioners of that period. He practised some as a physician and surgeon, particularly during the prevalence of the putrid sore throat (in 1795 I think.) He had two physicians and many other persons under his care but lost not a patient. He prepared most of the medicines he used and furnished them and his advice and attendance gratuitously. He afterwards occasionally gave medical advice, and at two different periods obtained the vaccine virus, and inoculated a number of persons gratuitously.

He was concerned, many years ago, in a duck factory in this place, and at one time was one of the Directors—probably about 1793 or 1794.

He was one of the Directors of the Nantucket Bank, which honorably closed its business, paying dollar for dollar, about the year 1804. At one period he engraved the plate and printed the bills for this institution.

It was probably in consequence of his connection with this Bank that his attention was directed to the study of law, having become well versed in which he gave up the watch-making business as a means of livelihood. As a Counsellor and Attorney at Law, he practised many years at the courts in this State and Rhode Island, quitting the practice altogether about the year 1828, when age and weariness of the profession induced him to retire from it.

He was one year a Representative in the General Court of Massachusetts, and six years a Senator in the same—from 1809 to 1815, inclusive.

As a lawyer he was generally very successful, showing a deep knowledge of the laws. He sometimes seemed to lack language to convey his ideas, but was convincing in argument.

He was six years a Judge of the Court of Common Pleas and of the Court of Sessions in this County, before the Cir-

cuit Courts were established, at one time being Chief Justice of both of those Courts. While serving in the capacity of Judge, there was not a single case carried to a higher court, which had frequently been done before and has been since.

He was elected for this District, including then, Barnstable, Nantucket and Dukes Counties, to the fifteenth and sixteenth Congresses, which he attended during the winters of 1817, 1818, 1819, 1820 and 1821. When in Congress, as well as when in the General Court, he was frequently called upon to make the calculations for the reports before those bodies, being generally acknowledged to be superior to the other members in mathematical ability.

During the last war with Great Britain, he established a factory at home, where carding, spinning and weaving were carried on by himself and his sons. His were among the earliest power looms in this country, and he manufactured many kinds of cotton and woolen cloths, some of them of excellent quality. At one time, when he went to the General Court, all his clothing was made from cloth manufactured in his establishment by his own family. One of his sons had his marriage suit made of cloth from the same factory. After peace took place, it is probable that the low price of foreign goods caused him to quit manufacturing. He was also an excellent chemist, and well acquainted with the art of coloring.

Many years ago, being fitting out part of a whale-ship, he made a calculation by a difficult Fluxional process, what form oil casks should have to hold the most with the least superficies, and he had his casks made agreeably to his plan, though contrary to the cooper's views. Gradually the people adopted his ideas, and by this means a great amount of money has been saved in this Island, as well as to other places where whaling has been carried on.

In 1812, he discovered a process for annealing wire without changing its color. He recommended it to Mr. Benjamin

Andrews, a hardware merchant of Boston, who had a wire factory in Roxbury, or that vicinity, and Mr. Folger went out to it with him, and saw him put the wire into the cylinder, which was enclosed and heated, according to his direction, and from which the wire was taken out as bright as ever. Recently, this process of annealing has been announced in Europe as a great discovery which had lately been made there.

He made several other discoveries and inventions in the arts, which he used in his own mechanical operations, and for which others have since taken out patents.

When a young man he made several telescopes, some of considerable power. The last one he constructed he began in 1819, at the age of 54 years, and finished about 1821. He cast the speculum and made the whole telescope himself. It is a reflecting telescope, has a magnifying power of about 450, taking in about one-sixth of the moon's surface at once, and shows the mountains of the moon very plainly, and also the spots on Venus. At the time of its construction, it was probably the best in America, being so pronounced, I believe, by the late Dr. Prince, of Salem.

About the year 1823, he made a number of good thermometers; and he kept a register of the thermometer, barometer, winds and weather from 1827 to 1848—a period of 21 years.

He had become so distinguished for his scientific, mathematical and mechanical genius, that for many years he used to be consulted by persons abroad, with regard to new inventions or discoveries of theirs.

A mathematician of Connecticut once sent him a treatise on Surveying, accompanied by some mathematical question with regard to constructing a part of the machinery used in winding cotton. He, upon examination, approved of the book, and sent him a letter containing his approbatory remarks; also a diagram illustrating the method of constructing the

part of the machine in question, and the necessary figures to show how he had accomplished the same.

Mr. Folger acted many years as a surveyor of land, and some of the large layings out of land here were made by him as principal surveyor. In 1821 or 1822, he was with Captain Colesworthy, in the survey then made of the South Shoal of Nantucket.

He was a proprietor of the Academy in this place, which went into operation in 1801. He composed the ode sung on the occasion by the best singers on the Island, to the tune called Victory.

Although never, I believe, a teacher of a common school, he ever took a lively interest in public education. During two winters, in the evenings, he taught the principles of Navigation and Nautical Astronomy, to a number of ship-masters and others, some of whom had navigated the globe by using the tables in the Navigator, without understanding the principles on which those tables were constructed.

He made observations on the Comet of 1811, which he furnished to the mathematical Professor at Cambridge University. He has since calculated the orbit of a comet. Dr. Bowditch, and other distinguished astronomers and mathematicians abroad, corresponded with him, and often received from him useful hints and aid in their pursuits.

The writer of these lines had an idea that the subject of them was better as an inventor or constructor than as a practical workman, but he is assured by a good practical mechanic, that in no one thing could he, the mechanic, excel Walter Folger.

He seemed to be ever ready to aid, with his advice or calculations, those who desired his help in mechanics, mathematics or science. He also gave, gratuitously, legal advice, which could not be procured elsewhere without a fee. It may be said of him that he discouraged litigation.

He owned a considerable part of a whale ship which was

taken by the British in the last war, when returning home from the Pacific, laden with oil, at a time when that article bore a very high price here. He has since lost considerable sums by failures and otherwise. His mind never seemed bent on enriching himself—he was ever frugal in his expenses, and plain in his dress and manner of living.

His parents were members of the Society of Friends, and educated their son in their tenets. Although he left the Society after arriving at manhood, there is no doubt but that he held to many of their views. He ever spoke of the Deity with reverence, and of the Saviour as a pattern to follow. As a Judge and as a citizen, he was upright and honest in all his dealings; perhaps rather too rigid and unforgiving with regard to such as he believed to be dishonest or deceitful; this feeling seemed to gain upon him till within the last year of his life.

In the 70th year of his age, he commenced a genealogy of the people of the Island, a work of some considerable labor, and to which he has continued to add till a late period.

Since retiring from the Courts, he has devoted much time to reading, and occasionally some to mathematical pursuits. He was a member of the Massachusetts Historical Society, in its early days, and contributed some papers; also a member of the Columbian Institute of Georgetown, D. C., and, it is believed, of some other Societies abroad. He was President of the Nantucket Philosophical Institute nearly the whole time of its continuance in operation, about from 1826 to 1832, and delivered several lectures before the members and others, and contributed several memoirs to its collections. He published, in various newspapers, and in some scientific works in Boston and New York, mathematical questions and their answers; but has not, as far as known to the writer, ever written a book of any size above a pamphlet. Some of the philosophical opinions first advanced in the papers by him, have since been adopted by others abroad.

He evidently had greater mechanical and mathematical

ability than Dr. Franklin, whom his portrait resembles. He was a man of great versatility of talent, which is proved by his succeeding so well in so many different callings, surpassing in them many who have devoted a whole life-time to one branch alone. He was almost wholly a self-taught man, and entitled, in the opinion of the writer, to the appellation of a Philosopher. He had failed in his memory and intellect for some years, but the last year it has been more perceptible. He died, Sept. 8th, 1849, aged 84 years and 3 months, wanting 4 days. F.

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